

6

TEAM SELF-LEADERSHIP

Sharing the Journey

When spiderwebs unite, they can tie up a lion.

—Ethiopian proverb

If we were to end the book at this point, we would be short-changing you.¹ You might decide to return the book to your bookstore and ask for your money back. The good news is that there is more to conquer.

Up to this chapter, our discussion on self-leadership has focused on you as an individual. We understand, however, that much of the work you do on a daily basis is not done by you alone. We realize that to accomplish many of your goals, you need to work with other people. A large majority of the work today in schools and businesses is done by teams of people as opposed to separate individuals.

The use of teams—self-directed teams, self-managing teams, and high-performance teams—is a work design innovation that has swept across the country and the rest of the world over the past few decades. This fact of business life continues to gain in popularity, as estimates suggest that 80 to 90 percent of all North American organizations have at least some type of self-managed teams.² Thus, chances are good that right now you are a member of a team—as a student in a university, as an employee in an organization, or even as part of a personal relationship (e.g., boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife).

The introduction of empowered work teams into the workplace represents one of the most important new organizational developments since the Industrial Revolution. Teams have demonstrated their ability to make major contributions to

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Explain why team members accomplish more together than they can as individuals.
2. Describe how team self-leadership is the application of mental and behavioral self-leadership strategies at the team level.
3. Demonstrate behavioral team self-leadership practices within a team, including team self-observation, team self-goal-setting, team cue modification, team self-reward and self-

punishment, and team rehearsal.

4. Employ mental team self-leadership strategies within a team, including evaluating team beliefs and assumptions, team self-talk, team mental imagery, and team thought patterns.
5. Recognize the importance of balancing the “me” with the “we” in a team setting by applying teamthink concepts and avoiding groupthink.

organizations in a variety of industries. Increased productivity; higher product and service quality; better quality of work life for employees; and reduced costs, turnover, and absenteeism are among the more salient payoffs.

Usually members of teams, in comparison with individual workers, have increased amounts of responsibility and control. Teams perform many tasks that previously were the responsibility of management, such as conducting meetings, solving technical and personal problems, and making a wide range of decisions on many issues, including performance methods and assignment of tasks. Successful teams are those that possess the skills, equipment, and supplies they need to perform the work well.

The best teams tend to have capable and committed members who successfully combine their skills and knowledge for the good of the team. The challenge for teams is to accept and appreciate the unique contributions that each member can make while effectively combining individual member contributions for the good of the team. The key to team success is the creation of synergy—the condition whereby team members together accomplish significantly more than they could if they acted on their own.³ (Team synergy might be expressed mathematically as $1 + 1 + 1 = 5$.) This definition fits well with the widely used acronym TEAM, for “together everyone achieves

more.” An interesting recent study compared the individual performance of professional golfers on the PGA tour to their performance when playing in two team-based competitions: the Ryder Cup and President’s Cup golf tournaments. The findings showed synergy in the performance of the golfers playing in small groups relative to their play as individuals.⁴ Teams work best when their members have strong individual skills and strong group skills. How can a team obtain synergy? We argue that self-leadership plays an integral part in the answer to this question.

SELF-LEADERSHIP AND TEAMS

You might be thinking, “Don’t the terms *self-leadership* and *teams* contradict or oppose each other?” In other words, what does leading oneself have to do with working as a member of a team? Actually, the two concepts are quite closely related. Self-leadership is just as important when you are working in a team as when you are working alone. To reach your individual potential while working within a team, you still must lead yourself. In fact, only by effectively leading yourself as a team member can you help the team lead itself, reach its potential, and thus achieve synergy. The act of the team leading itself describes the concept of team self-leadership, which can be defined as follows:

The application of mental and behavioral self-leadership strategies that enable team members to provide themselves with self-direction and self-motivation, and ultimately to become effective, personally empowered contributors to their team.

According to this definition, team self-leadership is similar to individual self-leadership in that both involve the use of behavioral and mental strategies. Next we will examine some of these team-based self-leadership strategies.⁵

BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS OF TEAM SELF-LEADERSHIP

Specific behavioral team self-leadership practices include team self-observation, team self-goal-setting, team cue modification, team self-reward/self-punishment, and team rehearsal (practice).

Team Self-Observation

At the team level, self-observation represents the team's collective effort to purposefully observe (and record) team behavior and performance, as well as the team's attempt to understand the antecedents and consequences associated with those actions. Self-observation should be done by the team. Thus, team self-observation encompasses group members working collectively to measure and understand the team's behavior. An example is a group seeking the information needed to compare the group's performance with its production goals.

Team Self-Goal-Setting

Individuals on a team can have personal goals that are coordinated with and necessary for achieving the team's goals, but the focus for the team is to achieve the shared goals of the team as a whole. Team self-goal-setting accordingly requires the group as a collective (rather than an individual leader) to establish the goals. Goal-setting by the group thus represents an element of self-leadership for the team that encompasses, but is not defined by, individual goals of team members or leaders.

Team Cue Modification

Teams can remove things that cue undesirable behavior and increase exposure to elements that cue desirable behavior. When a team changes environmental conditions that affect behavior, team self-leadership occurs. Attempts to change the environment are collectively performed by the team and are not synonymous with individual attempts to

modify antecedents that cue behavior. An example is a team deciding to alter the configuration of its work space.

Team Self-Reward and Self-Punishment

Teams can reinforce their own desirable behaviors by providing rewards—to individual members and to the group as a whole—that strengthen or increase those behaviors. These rewards may be tangible or intangible. Tangible rewards might include monetary bonuses, time off, or the purchase of new equipment. Intangible rewards might include increased satisfaction, joy from working as a team, or a feeling of respect for the work accomplished by the team. Punishment involves applying negative consequences to reduce undesirable behaviors. An example of team self-punishment is a team deciding that all members must work late to make up for time spent in excessive socializing. For team self-influence to take place, the group must administer and receive rewards and sanctions collectively. It is important to note that as with individual self-leadership, team self-punishment is neither the preferred nor the most effective method for influencing a team's behavior.

Team Rehearsal

As discussed, rehearsal or practice is another step associated with the self-leadership process. Teams may conduct rehearsal either overtly or covertly. An example of rehearsal might be several team members practicing a presentation their team must make to the rest of the organization. To be considered team rehearsal, this practice must be initiated and directed by the team as a whole rather than by an individual team member.

MENTAL ASPECTS OF TEAM SELF-LEADERSHIP

An underlying assumption of the discussion of mental team self-leadership strategies involves the emergence of a group pattern of thinking, which is more than the simple collection of the thinking of separate individual minds. This notion of a “group mind” has been addressed by various researchers.⁶ For example, W. R. Bion asserted that a group's mind-set exists beyond that of the individual group members in that the group's mind-set connects group members through an unconscious implied agreement.⁷

Accordingly, the basic premise of mental team self-leadership is that, similar to self-leading individuals, teams can enhance their performance through the collective application of specific mental strategies that result in a team mode of thinking. These collective mental strategies include evaluating beliefs and assumptions, self-talk, and

mental imagery. As with our representation of individual mental self-leadership, these components of collective mental strategies interact reciprocally to influence thought patterns (in this case, the thought patterns of the team).

Team Beliefs and Assumptions

Recall our earlier discussion of individual beliefs and assumptions. We suggested that distorted thoughts are based on some common dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions that are activated by potentially troubling situations. Most of these types of individual-level beliefs have analogues at the group level. For example, recall the individual-level dysfunctional assumption known as extreme thinking, in which individuals evaluate things in extreme categories, as black or white. Similarly, a group can develop extreme beliefs. To illustrate, if a risk does not seem overwhelmingly dangerous, the team as a whole might be inclined to minimize its importance and proceed without further preparation to meet the risk instead of developing contingency plans in case the risk materializes.

Team Self-Talk

Earlier we described individual self-talk as what we tell ourselves, and we suggested that a person's self-talk can affect his or her effectiveness. In the same manner, group self-talk might significantly influence group performance. For example, within a cohesive team there is a tendency for members to put social pressure on any member who expresses opinions that deviate from the group's dominant form of dialogue. The group members exert this pressure to ensure that the deviant member does not disrupt the consensus of the group as a whole. This tendency toward group-enforced conformity dialogue (group self-talk) might lead to defective decision making on the part of the group (see the discussion of groupthink later in this chapter).

Team Mental Imagery

A team could potentially enhance its performance by utilizing group mental imagery to establish a common vision. Given that members of successful groups tend to share a common vision, self-managing teams faced with strategic decisions should benefit from interactively creating a common image regarding what they want to accomplish, as well as visualizing effective means for doing so. Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon.com, has commented on the importance of positive team mental imagery:

My own view is that every company requires a long-term view. If you're going to take a long-term orientation, you have to be willing to stay heads down and ignore a wide array of critics, even well-meaning critics. If you don't have a willingness to be misunderstood for a long period of time, then you can't have a long-term orientation. Because we have done it many times

Constructive Thought-Focused Strategies in Self-Managing Teams

We have suggested in this chapter that self-leadership strategies are just as important for people working in teams as for people working alone. It is easy to understand how behavior-focused strategies applied at the team level, such as team self-goal-setting and team self-reward, could have a positive impact on team effectiveness. But are the mental aspects of self-leadership also effective at the team level? Is there really a “group mind” through which self-leadership’s mental strategies can be applied within teams? A recent study of 103 self-managing teams comprised of 453 individuals found that the constructive, thought-focused strategies applied equally well across levels of analysis

(i.e., for both individuals and teams).¹ More specifically, the findings suggest that the thought self-leadership strategies of team self-dialogues, team evaluation of beliefs and assumptions, and team mental imagery result in a higher level of team collective efficacy, which involves collective feelings of competence shared among team members, and ultimately in higher levels of team performance and team viability. Although more studies examining constructive, thought-focused self-leadership at the team level are needed, this study provides compelling initial evidence in support of the effectiveness of the mental team self-leadership strategies described in this chapter.

Note

1. Pedro Marques Quinteiro, Ana Passos, and Luís Curral, “Thought Self-Leadership and Effectiveness in Self-Management Teams,” *Leadership* 12, no. 1 (February 2016): 110–26.

and have come out the other side, we have enough internal stories that we can tell ourselves. While we’re crossing the desert, we may be thirsty, but we sincerely believe there’s an oasis on the other side.⁸

Team Thought Patterns

Like individuals, teams can develop thought patterns. In other words, a team can be an opportunity or obstacle thinker. An example of team opportunity or obstacle thinking can involve the group’s perception of its ability to overcome a particular challenge. If a team is faced with a technical problem that affects the quality of its product, it can view this as an opportunity to focus the group’s energies and utilize the decision-making and technical skills of the team, or it can see the problem as an obstacle that will prevent the team from producing a product of high quality. If the team believes that this technical problem is an insurmountable obstacle, then it is practically assured that the product’s quality will suffer. On the other hand, if the team feels that the problem is an opportunity to improve the product further, the probability of the team’s producing a high-quality product is enhanced. Thus, if a team believes problems are opportunities to overcome challenges rather than obstacles that will lead to failure, the team’s performance should be enhanced.

TEAM SELF-LEADERSHIP STILL MEANS INDIVIDUAL SELF-LEADERSHIP

Now that we have briefly described specific team self-leadership strategies, we return to an important point mentioned earlier in this chapter: you must effectively lead yourself as a team member if you want to help the team lead itself, reach its potential, and thus achieve synergy. To explore this concept more fully, consider the following story:

A French scientist, Jean-Henri Fabre, had a very interesting passion in life—the study of caterpillars. At one point in his research, he conducted an experiment that involved processionary caterpillars, wormlike creatures that travel in long, unwavering lines, at the same pace and cadence. Fabre placed a group of processionary caterpillars onto the thin rim of a large flowerpot, forming a circle of caterpillars, so that the leader of the group was nose to tail with the last caterpillar in the slow, nonending procession. Even for Fabre it was difficult to figure out who was the leader and who were the followers. For an entire day Fabre watched the caterpillars endlessly circle the rim of the flowerpot. He then went home for the night, and in the morning when he arrived at his laboratory he noticed that the caterpillars were still circling the pot. Then, Fabre placed a supply of food in the center of the flowerpot, but this did not detour the caterpillars. They never stopped circling—not even to eat. Day after day, night after night, the caterpillars paraded around and around and around and around. After seven days of parading the rim, the caterpillars finally stopped because they died of starvation and exhaustion. Not for one moment did a single caterpillar stop to look up, eat, or interrupt the circle of travel. Instead, they all put their heads down and blindly followed the caterpillars ahead of them (instead of thinking maybe some other way was better) until they died.⁹

LeBron James

Despite being one of the greatest individual players in the history of the NBA, LeBron James learned at a very early age the importance of balancing the “me” with the “we” as an essential component of team success. Unsurprisingly, back in 1993, in 9-year-old LeBron’s first year playing competitive basketball, his team went undefeated and won the Akron Recreation Bureau’s youth league

championship. Equally unsurprisingly, James was named the team’s Most Valuable Player (MVP). But his teammates Frankie Walker Jr., Willie McGee, and one young lady, Lavette Wilborn, were also named team MVPs. In fact, *everyone* on LeBron’s team received an MVP trophy! “That’s still fair,” his former youth basketball coach Frank Walker Sr. noted recently. “He still got MVP.” Coach

Walker's decision to give MVP trophies to everyone on the team had a profound influence in shaping young LeBron's development as a basketball player. Given his limited experience playing the sport, he didn't understand what an exceptional gesture it was to make every player an MVP—he simply thought this was how the game of basketball was played. "Right then I knew that this is a team game," James said in a recent interview. "It's not about one individual and how much one individual can do in order to win championships. In order to win, you have to have a full team."

Another lesson in balancing the "me" with the "we" came courtesy of the Akron Recreation Bureau youth league's rule that no player on a team with ten or more players could play more than two quarters of a game. Young LeBron sat on the bench for half of every game, learning the value of trusting and relying on teammates. "It's just been instilled in me since I was 9 years old, when I first started playing, of what it means to be in a situation where your teammates rely on you," James said. One of those early teammates was an undersized 7-year-old named Sonny Spoon. "Nobody could pass him the ball without him falling over," teammate Willie McGee recalled. But in one of the final games of the season, LeBron decided to find a way to get the ball to Sonny so he could score a basket. "He rolled him the ball on the ground," McGee explained. Sonny scooped up the unconventional pass and heaved it

toward the rim with all the strength he could muster. The ball swished through! Assist, LeBron James!

Reliance on teammates has always been important for LeBron. The game-winning shot made in overtime that won that first championship game was made not by James, but by teammate Brandon Weems. Later in high school, LeBron won his first state championship by passing the ball repeatedly to Dru Joyce III, a 5-foot-2-inch, 95-pound freshman who had barely played all year. Joyce made seven three-point shots in a row, and because of LeBron's unselfishness, his team won yet again. James made a similar decision to trust a teammate in Game 1 of the 2018 NBA Finals. With five seconds left in the game and the score tied, LeBron opted not to take the final shot of the game and instead passed the ball to teammate George Hill, who had a better shot under the basket. Hill was fouled and went to the free throw line. Hill missed the attempt and another teammate, J.R. Smith, inexplicably grabbed the rebound and dribbled away from the basket as regulation time expired. This time, his team lost in overtime, but LeBron's unselfish pass demonstrated his belief that basketball should never be solely about one individual player. He was only doing what he learned as a 9-year-old playing youth basketball and has been doing ever since: trusting his teammates and balancing the "me" with the "we."

Source/Additional Reading

Cohen, Ben. 2018. "Why LeBron James (Still) Trusts His Teammates." *The Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-lebron-james-still-trusts-his-teammates-1528211656?ns=prod/accounts-wsj>.

This story might parallel a challenge you have faced or will face as a member of a team. The challenge involves not acting like Fabre's caterpillars and blindly following the members of your team. By doing this, you are not practicing effective team

self-leadership. To practice effective team self-leadership, you must concurrently maintain your own unique belief system and viewpoint and work together with others as a team. If you give up your own uniqueness and way of looking at the world by failing to tell the group your position on topics, then your group could end up like the helpless caterpillars. In other words, if all the members of your group blindly follow each other, then they will continue to circle, never progressing and thus never performing well. This does not mean that you should not try to cooperate with team members; rather, all members should work together in an effective manner. When a team works together, it is productive for members to disagree and constructively discuss different views. Only by considering differing views can your team develop the ideal way to approach a task or problem. Only by maintaining your individual viewpoint can you add to the team self-leadership of your group.

By now, you might have recognized that team self-leadership involves balance between a focus on yourself and a focus on the team. We refer to this as a balance between the “me” and the “we.” By successfully maintaining this balance, you will prosper within your group and help yourself and your team members avoid acting like caterpillars.

BALANCING THE “ME” WITH THE “WE”

A well-known proverb states, “The best potential in ‘me’ is ‘we.’” The underlying message in this adage is a critical aspect of team self-leadership: to reach your ultimate potential as a member of a team, you must work *with* your team and not *against* it. If team members are focused only on themselves and the credit they receive rather than on the success of the team as a whole, the individual members’ performance and the team’s overall performance will suffer. The following story illustrates this critical point:

Two geese were about to start southward on their annual migration, when they were entreated by a frog to take him with them. The geese expressed their willingness to do so if a means of conveyance could be devised.

The frog produced a long stalk of pond grass, got the geese each to grab an end with their beaks, while he clung to it by his mouth in the middle. In this way the three began their journey. Some farmers below noticed the strange sight. The men loudly expressed their admiration for the travel device and wondered who had been clever enough to discover it. Whereupon the vain-glorious frog opened his mouth to say, “It was I,” lost his grip, fell to the earth, and was dashed to pieces.¹⁰

One moral to this story could be, “When you have a good thing going, keep your mouth shut!” Although truth and humor can be found in this interpretation, a moral more applicable to an understanding of team self-leadership is as follows:

Effective team self-leadership will not occur when team members place too much emphasis on themselves and worry too much about who is going to get

the credit. This approach will bring poor performance to the team members and to the team as a whole.

Conversely, team members who are committed to team self-leadership, who recognize that the best potential in “me” is “we,” and who recognize that team success requires a total group effort whereby team members strive unselfishly to complete their task or project, eventually will achieve their individual goals and those of the team. Consider an additional example written by organizational consultant Dr. Bruce H. Jackson regarding the importance of balancing the “me” with the “we” in teams:

For more than three decades I have studied the lives of high performers to identify the principles and practices that make them great.

In the study and practice of self-leadership we often speak of vision, goals, values, attitude, perspective, grit, discipline, commitment, physical strength, and hundreds of other factors designed to produce individual results. But in my personal journey to excel as an athlete, student, and professional, and to help others do the same, I have discovered that to achieve your best you often have to help others discover their best. This great secret seems counter-intuitive. But it's true.

Case in point: I recently spoke to a former Olympic gold medalist (rower) to better understand what it took to make the final cut. We spoke of his personal journey to make the team from more than 30 exceptional athletes. Through our conversation a significant principle emerged.

You might think, as I did, that making the team had everything to do with proving your speed, strength, and technical prowess. But that wasn't it at all. . . .

This rower explained that there are 3 mindsets a team can choose when rowing together: Mindset 1: Row your best and hope your teammate does the same. Mindset 2: Seek to bring out the best in your teammate with your own performance taking a secondary focus. The hope is that your selfless efforts will buy the team a few seconds. And Mindset 3: Where both rowers focus on bringing out the best in each other to maximize the synergy of the pair.

Recognizing that Mindset 3 is pretty rare, especially when everything is on the line (think Prisoner's Dilemma), this rower knew that if he could bring out the best in every member he rowed with during the trials, that this philosophy might make the difference—however small. But small is all you need when a hundredth of a second is the difference between winning a medal—and not.

While not the fastest or the strongest amongst his colleagues, this rower knew the strengths and weaknesses of every other rower seeking a spot on

the team. Whoever he was paired with he devised unique ways to tap into their deepest reservoirs of motivation and energy to bring out the best in each partner. This philosophy landed this rower, and whomever he was rowing with, the best time in each heat.

With his name amidst every #1 pair, he ultimately made the Olympic team and the rest is history. To this day he retains this winning philosophy, recognizing that achieving greatness does not come solely from physical and technical gifts, nor a focus on self, but instead on helping the other members of his team tap into their greatness—for their greatness carried his greatness—making $1 + 1 = 3$.

I've had similar conversations with former and current NAVY SEALs, Rangers, and other Special Forces units. While each member of the team is an extraordinary performer, no mission is accomplished alone without the support and encouragement of the other team members. Each member is more dedicated to the lives of their teammates than to themselves. That is why they are the best at what they do.

Whether you seek to be a great basketball, football, or hockey player, law enforcement officer or fire fighter, actor or surgeon, discovering one's best self is never a solo act.

In a world where “selfie” is now a registered word (heaven help us), this secret principle puts much needed attention on the value of bringing out the best in others—giving us all something to think about as we seek to make, and be an indispensable member of, our own version of the gold medal team!¹¹

One of the more powerful self-leadership strategies that can be used in relation to teams is that of shared leadership. Shared leadership is a dynamic, interactive influence process in which team members lead one another to accomplish team goals successfully.¹² With shared leadership, leadership comes from, and is received by, all team members such that all members actively engage in the leadership of the team. The idea behind shared leadership is that everyone involved is a leader at least some of the time, and all members share in the overall leadership process.

If leadership is to be shared by the team, what is the point of self-leadership? Shared leadership and self-leadership are inextricably linked in that team members incapable of self-leadership also are incapable of shared leadership. For instance, effective shared leadership requires all team members to trust that each will follow through with his or her specific responsibilities; in other words, all team members need to be capable self-leaders. Equally important is the fact that capable self-leaders have the self-confidence and self-awareness to know their abilities as well as their limitations. This clear self-knowledge enables them to (1) lead others when they possess the relevant knowledge and (2) be led by others when it is others who possess the relevant expertise.

Miracle (2004)

Two scenes from *Miracle*, the story of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, help to demonstrate the importance of balancing the “me” with the “we” in a team setting. The first scene begins just after the opening credits with U.S. Olympic hockey team coach Herb Brooks (Kurt Russell) in a meeting discussing his vision and goals for his team. Brooks explains that he wants to adopt a new style of hockey, based on the Soviet style, for his team that takes the talents of the individual and uses those talents inside a system that is designed for the betterment of the team. He further states that his goal is to beat the Soviets at their own game. One of the participants in the meeting replies, “Beat the best team in the world? Gold medalists in ‘64, ‘68, ‘72, and ‘76? That’s a pretty lofty goal, Herb.” Brooks responds simply, “That’s why I want to pursue it.”

The second scene (about 38 minutes into the movie) begins with Coach Brooks saying, “Get a whistle.” His team has just tied the Norwegian national team in a halfhearted effort. Brooks is seeing too much individualism in his players. When he asks them whom they play for, each responds with the name of his college or university. In an attempt to eliminate this excessive individualism and make his players into a cohesive team, Brooks makes them skate “suicide” drills repeatedly until they are physically exhausted. Throughout

the intense ordeal, the coach emphasizes to the players, “When you pull on that jersey, you represent yourself and your teammates. And the name on the front is a helluva lot more important than the one on the back! Get that through your head!” Finally, just as it seems that Brooks will never let them leave the ice, team member Mike Eruzione (Patrick O’Brien Demsey) suddenly shouts: “Mike Eruzione. Winthrop, Massachusetts.” Brooks turns to him and pointedly asks, “Who do you play for?” Eruzione responds: “I play for the United States of America!” Coach Brooks says, “That’s all, gentlemen.”

Discussion Questions

1. Explain Coach Brooks’s plan for winning a gold medal. What does he hope to train his team to do differently than previous U.S. Olympic hockey teams?
2. What does Brooks mean when he says, “The name on the front of the jersey is more important than the name on the back”?
3. In what ways can too much individualism be detrimental to a hockey team?
4. Why is Mike Eruzione’s statement an important turning point for the team?
5. Do you think Coach Brooks and his players are able to find the right balance between the “me” and the “we”?

In today’s increasingly common team-based environments, having a group of people who are capable of self-leadership is necessary, but not sufficient, to guarantee the success of a team. The next generation of leadership will need to be fully engaged in

shared leadership such that all team members are capable self-leaders, capable of leading others, and capable of being led. A team of self-leaders who step forward to lead when they are most needed and step back and let others with greater expertise lead when necessary can accomplish great things.¹³

GROUPTHINK VERSUS TEAMTHINK

To reiterate, too much “we-ness” can lead to a situation in which members act like caterpillars and blindly follow the team as a whole. When this happens, the team is trapped in the vicious circle, neither progressing nor performing well. This type of situation, in which group members engage in groupthink, is a common pitfall to team success. The phenomenon of groupthink leads groups to become overly conforming and ineffective in their decision making.¹⁴

Consider an example of too much “we-ness” (groupthink) in a team. Have you ever been in a team situation in which members were discussing a particular problem, and in the course of that discussion you had an important thought that went against the predominant view of most of the team? Did you remain silent or speak up? If you remained silent, you were helping your team experience groupthink—or too much “we-ness.” You were not maintaining your individuality; you were not expressing your personal viewpoints. The outcome of your inaction, especially if other members also were suppressing their divergent views, was likely defective decision making and consequently poor team performance.

An effective team member in a scenario such as this one would not remain silent. Teams that practice team self-leadership exhibit “teamthink” behaviors as opposed to groupthink behaviors. When team members engage in teamthink, they strike a balance between themselves (the “me”) and the team (the “we”).¹⁵ This balance involves members working together as a cohesive unit but at the same time constructively disagreeing when it is necessary to do so. This type of scenario can create synergy, as discussed above—that is, a situation in which the team’s total results are greater than the sum of what each member could accomplish individually. Additionally, a team that employs teamthink encourages each member to express *all* of his or her views and ideas so that the team can determine the optimal manner of performing a task or handling a problem. In short, the most effective self-leadership teams are those that demonstrate teamthink behaviors. Table 6.1 contrasts the characteristics, or symptoms, of teams experiencing groupthink with those of teams engaging in teamthink.

Before we conclude this chapter, we want to share one final word about how working in teams is evolving in today’s organizations and about the importance of self-leadership in these new team contexts. Many people in organizations across the globe now work in virtual teams.¹⁶ Members working in a virtual team rarely, if ever, interact face-to-face. Instead, they accomplish their work from remote locations and communicate through electronic media such as e-mail, video conferencing, instant messaging, and Skype. Virtual teams provide substantial cost savings to organizations, eliminating travel costs and enhancing long-distance information sharing, while allowing greater flexibility for

team members through their ability to accomplish team tasks from any location, including their homes. Although to date little research has examined the role of self-leadership in virtual teams,¹⁷ self-leadership processes would appear to be especially important in a virtual context, where team members are expected to work more autonomously and with less direct supervision and social support than in traditional face-to-face teams.

Table 6.1 Groupthink Versus Teamthink

Groupthink	Teamthink
Direct social pressure against divergent views	Encouragement of divergent views
Self-censorship of concerns	Open expression of concerns/ideas
Illusion of invulnerability to failure	Awareness of limitations/threats
Illusion of unanimity	Recognition of members' uniqueness
Self-appointed mind guards that screen out external information	Recognition of views outside the group
Collective efforts to rationalize	Discussion of collective doubts
Stereotyped views of enemy leaders	Utilization of nonstereotypical views
Illusion of morality	Recognition of ethical and moral consequences of decisions

In summary, we have attempted to show in this chapter that self-leadership and teams are not conflicting concepts. Self-leadership is not only an integral dimension of individual performance but also a key element of team success.

REAL-WORLD SELF-LEADERSHIP CASE

Tragedy on Mount Everest

On May 10, 1996, four expeditions of climbers set out to summit Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world at more than 29,000 feet above sea level and the grandest objective in all of mountaineering. Hours later, eight of the climbers would be dead and several more injured in what would become one of the most disastrous days in the mountain's history. Climbing Everest is an inherently dangerous

undertaking, and hundreds of climbers have perished attempting to reach the summit. Summiting involves careful planning, tight controls, and close coordination. Climbers often leave the highest base camp, Camp IV, at midnight carrying canisters of oxygen that will last 16 to 17 hours. The objective is to summit early in the day, followed by a quick descent in advance of the relatively common afternoon snowstorms and full oxygen depletion, which occurs around 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. A turnaround time of noon

is considered conservative, while a return time of 2:00 p.m. is viewed as risky.

By 1996, the Everest experience had been commercialized to the point that four groups of climbers were attempting to summit the relatively overcrowded mountain that day. Of note were two commercial expeditions, the first led by Rob Hall of Adventure Consultants and the second by Scott Fischer of Mountain Madness. Both were skilled and knowledgeable climbers who had experience summing Everest. Hall's team was composed of fifteen climbers including clients and professional guides Mike Groom and Andy Harris, while Fischer's team had twelve members, including clients and guides Neal Beidleman and Anatoli Boukreev. Both teams included local Sherpa guides, whose mountaineering skill and experience are critical to successful Everest expeditions.

As they planned for the final push to the top, Hall and Fischer decided that they would pool their resources and work together. One Sherpa from each team would be dispatched ahead of the main groups to set the fixed ropes necessary to climb a technical area known as "The Balcony." However, one of the Sherpas, Lopsang Jangbu, was busy assisting a client and did not ascend in advance of the team to assist the second Sherpa, Anj Dorje, in setting the ropes. Dorje refused to work alone and consequently the ropes weren't set. When the main group of climbers reached The Balcony, a bottleneck ensued that substantially slowed down all the climbers while Anatoli Boukreev and Neal Beidleman worked on getting the ropes in place.

With a nasty storm forming beneath them, the delays and resulting slow climbing made it apparent that the teams would not be able to reach the summit by 2:00 p.m. However, instead of turning their clients around and heading back down the mountain, guides from both teams decided to keep going and attempt to summit. As was his habit, Boukreev climbed ahead of the main groups and reached the summit by himself. Although his boss, Fischer, disagreed with this practice, Boukreev believed that guides should not be responsible for babysitting clients and that anyone

attempting to climb the mountain should be able to watch out for themselves. Consequently, Boukreev climbed entirely alone that day and did not help any climbers up or down the mountain, which could have resulted in a faster descent for all ahead of the fierce storm that would soon break.

Around 4:00 p.m., Rob Hall assisted client Doug Hansen in reaching the summit. Moments later as they began their descent, Hansen collapsed with his oxygen supplies exhausted. Hall refused to abandon him there. Meanwhile, Fischer and Jangbu were in serious trouble a few hundred feet lower, while the rest of the climbers, scattered at other locations on the mountain, were being enveloped by the thickening snow storm. In the end, Hansen, Hall, and Fischer would all die, along with five other members of the expeditions. The death toll could have been even worse if Boukreev (who later claimed he descended quickly in order to be fresh if called upon to assist in rescuing other descending climbers) and Beidleman had not literally dragged several of the remaining struggling climbers back to the safety of Camp IV. The 1996 Everest disaster remains one of the darkest chapters in the history of the lonely mountain.

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Do you think that better self-leadership among the members of the 1996 Everest expedition teams could have led to better decisions? How?
2. In what ways might groupthink have played a role in this disaster, and how could a teamthink approach have been beneficial in this situation?
3. In what way might the outcome have been different if members of the expeditions had more effectively balanced the "me" with the "we" in this case?
4. What would you have done if you had been a member of one of the 1996 expedition teams?

Sources/Additional Readings

Burnette, Jeni L., Jeffrey M. Pollack, and Donelson R. Forsyth. 2011. "Leadership in Extreme Contexts: A Groupthink Analysis of the May 1996 Mount Everest Disaster." *Journal of Leadership Studies* 4, no. 4 (Winter): 29–40.

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